

Weightlifting
August 5, 2008
Matthew 11:25-30

The Olympics are in full swing. How many people here have seen at least a few minutes of the games this year? That's not too surprising, I don't think, considering some 70 million people tuned in to NBC to see the opening ceremonies. But for all the excitement of the Olympic games, many of the competitions go fairly unnoticed. And one of those sports is weightlifting.

Now when I think of weightlifting I often think of gigantic, muscle-bound athletes with veins popping out of their biceps. But, if you were to pass some of the Olympic weightlifters in plain clothes, you would find some pretty regular looking people. People who don't seem to be national or world champions. And after thinking about it, that kind of makes sense to me, because I've seen the super-human strength of some pretty regular people on occasion. The person who comes to mind first is my mom: she never lifted on record, but I can testify to her super-human strength. She put that on display for me one afternoon after I welcomed my new baby brother home from the hospital with a bite on the cheek. My 120 pound mom promptly broke a wooden spoon over my rear-end *in one swing*.

And we might all have similar stories of close-encounters with regular people demonstrating super-strength (Though I hope you weren't the same kind of participant I was). But a thought we might entertain this morning is that maybe most of these Olympic athletes *are regular people, regular people* who manage to do extraordinary things. And that's precisely what makes them so inspiring. They are, in so many ways, just like you, and just like me.

One regular person I read about was Melanie Roach. Melanie is a 117 pound woman who seems, at first glance, pretty normal. She is a wife, a mom for three children, and she owns a small business. But she is also, now, an Olympian. And the road that brought her to Beijing was pretty incredible. Melanie was a 2000 Olympic hopeful who missed the games in Sydney because of a back injury. After leaving weightlifting and mothering three children, she returned to the sport at the age of 33. She underwent back surgery and a whirlwind recovery before winning the first spot on the US Women's Olympic weightlifting team.

And so the question surfaces: How does a woman like this not only find ways to overcome injury, the demands of life, and the anxieties of competition, but also does all that *and then* lifts on the Olympic stage?

This is the question we must return to. What does it take not only to endure difficult circumstances, but also to lift world-class weights?

Now I would love to tell you that Melanie's story has an ending quite like Michael Phelps or Dara Torres. But Melanie didn't take the gold. She didn't take the silver, nor did she take the bronze. Like many other athletes at the Olympics, Melanie Roach competed and did not medal. That being said, she did achieve a personal best, completing all six lifts and breaking the American record. I'd say lifting a combined total of 425 pounds is pretty good for a 33 year-old mother of three who weighs in at only 117 pounds. So even without a shiny medal and media glory, the feat that Melanie struggled to achieve brings us back to our question. How do we struggle through tough circumstances to achieve world-class goals?

I want to suggest this morning that lifting weight successfully requires passion. If there is one thing all the Olympic athletes seem to share, it is passion. Passion is vitally important because it is through passion that a goal can transform and make meaningful the inevitable struggles. I want to suggest this morning that we can struggle through some of the most trying obstacles for the sake of a world-class goal, for a world-important hope; and we can do that when we have passion. For Melanie Roach, the inevitable struggles included injuries, age, and many competing commitments. And Melanie, in so many ways, is just like the rest of us.

So today we are going to use the Olympic games and weightlifting to think through our faith.

Analogies like this serve as a bridge of understanding, a way for us to use 21st century experience in order to illuminate our lives of faith. And there is biblical precedent for that, I think. Paul and other NT authors use athletic metaphors of their own time in order to encourage, exhort, and teach. In fact we saw how that might work with Kory's sermon last week.

In that sermon we touched on the Olympic theme by looking into our races of faith. Kory reminded us that faith is not a one time event; that the life of faith is more like a race of endurance than a sprint. What's most important is that our races are about finishing faithfully, not finishing first, thanks be to God.

This week we are shifting our attention from running to lifting. From enduring on foot, to enduring under great pressure. I hope you will be able to think with me about how Olympic weightlifting might inform and enrich our faith.

With that in mind, let's turn in our bibles to the Gospel of Matthew.

What's going on?

- ✠ Chapters 5 – 7 is the famous sermon on the mount
- ✠ chapters 8 – 9 is Jesus in action, healing and traveling.
- ✠ In Chapter 10 Jesus speaks about missions and sending out the disciples.
- ✠ Beginning of Chapter 11 Jesus addresses issues of his identity and that of John the baptist.
- ✠ He then issues two woes against unrepentant Galilean cities. From those woes we move into our passage this morning.
- ✠ v. 25 “these things” being Jesus' identity and role.

This passage is very recognizable, many of you may be familiar with it. You may also be familiar with some popular interpretations of it. I want to isolate two of them. First, some will point to this Scripture to establish faith as something different from, and maybe antagonistic toward, intelligence. After all, Jesus is revealed not to the intelligent but to infants (who we presume are without education and a well-developed intellect). Second, many people point to, and find comfort in, an “easy yoke,” which is understood to mean a life with less trouble and difficulty. Now both of these responses to Scripture have their place. *We should* be cautious about the corruptibility of our intellect, and *we should* rejoice when we find moments of rest under an “easy yoke.” Unfortunately, there is a tendency, as with much of Scripture, to over-simplify. So I am going to try and resist over-simplifying here; I guess I will be under-simplifying, maybe “complexifying” if you will.

I want to focus on some other elements that might help us make sense of this passage in a different way. I think it is far too simplistic for us to leave the passage thinking that Jesus' message and identity is not for smart people. In fact, what is regrettable is that some people have taken this passage to command that one should not go to school, especially not attend college or seminary. As I am in Divinity School, I would disagree here.

So, I don't think Jesus is condemning the intelligent because they are intelligent. Nor is Jesus, in my estimation, calling us to be, literally, infants. The Greek word (*nepiois*) translated “infant” or “child” might be better understood in this passage as “little persons” or “insignificant ones.” And that makes sense, Jesus' ministry was aimed at those who were marginalized and left out of society at the time: women, the sick, prostitutes, tax collectors... all kinds of sinners. So the ones who received Jesus' message and repented were these “insignificant ones.” Thus, Jesus is thanking God for graciously sending him to those who may have considered themselves insignificant, and were definitely considered insignificant by the powerful, learned elite.

And just as I don't think Jesus is condemning the intelligent for being intelligent, I don't think Jesus is talking about how easy life will be either. A yoke, is a yoke, is a yoke; even though a yoke may be light (relative to heavier yokes), it is still a yoke. One that carries with it a kind of weight. Jesus is not inviting us into a yoke-free existence. We might be able to eat eggs **yolk**-free, but we can never *live*

yoke-free. So instead of going without any weights, we are invited by Jesus to be a kind of weightlifter; we are invited to lift Jesus' yoke with him, as he is yoked to us. Why is that, though, why can't we get the yoke-free pass?

In the Jewish tradition, the word “yoke” was a way of talking about obedience and servanthood. And Jesus reminds us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:24) that everybody serves someone, it's just a matter of who we serve. Thus, there is always a yoke. It's a matter of which yoke we choose to put on. Jesus invites the weary and the burdened into his service in order to become obedient to the will of God made known through Jesus. So on the one hand, with a Jewish connotation, “yoke” means a kind of obedience. On the other hand, the Greek word (*zugos*), which translates “yoke,” is one with imperial connotations. Jesus is calling people out of the taxing demands of Roman imperial obedience into a new Kingdom, one defined by justice, kindness, and humility (remember Micah 6:8?).

Jesus is also responding to the shackles, burdens, and weight of the religious elite who managed to burden many people with the demands of religious observance. On top of that, the religious system of Jesus' day also ostracized and marginalized the very people who they should have been serving. The poor, sick, and downtrodden were being treated as sinners and pushed out of the way. So Jesus called these very people into his service—the poor, sick and downtrodden, as well as the religiously burdened—so they might seek after the ways of God. But Jesus doesn't *just* call the poor, sick, downtrodden, and burdened into God's service, Jesus calls everyone. And it's here we should remember the first part of the passage, verse 25. Jesus is graciously revealed as Christ not to those who take pride in their wisdom and intelligence, for their self-righteous pride easily blinds them; rather Jesus is most easily seen by those who humble themselves and recognize their need for a different, lighter yoke.

Well what about this lighter yoke? The road of justice, kindness, and humility doesn't sound very easy, and it doesn't seem like we get a lot of rest. So what about rest and ease? What about the “lightness” of the yoke?

Ultimately, we are not invited *out of* our every-day lives into a life of ease. Instead, we are called *into* our every-day lives with a new purpose, with a new mission, obedient to a new Master. We are called to lift the weight of God's Kingdom, yoked to Jesus Christ. Our yoked existence to Jesus connects us to the work God began in Jesus. In other words, we are called to be weight-lifters, but now, with a different set of weights. These weights are those of the Kingdom of God. They are weights filled with the justice, kindness, and humility of Micah 6:8. And the people lifting them are pretty regular people, like you and like me; and so, like regular people, we struggle with all kinds of exterior things as well as the difficult task of lifting God's Kingdom into existence.

So our rest is not an absence of labor, for there is always something to do. Rather it is deeper, more “existential.” (A rest on the level of our soul, so to speak). I think St. Augustine, a 4th century Bishop from Africa, says it best as he addresses God: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.” We can rest in the meaning and mission of God's Kingdom as we live out our lives yoked to our Savior Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God is a world-class weight and a world-important hope. Christ invites regular people like you and me to lift this kind of incredible weight.

As we move from this morning's sermon to our hymn, to offering, and then to communion, may we be reminded of that lingering question I posed to us: “How do we endure difficult circumstances to lift world-class weights?” I want to suggest this morning we must be driven by passion. But the passion that drives us as weightlifters for the Kingdom of God is more than unbounded desire coming from the rest we find in the meaning of God's Kingdom, it is also the Passion of Jesus Christ. This is the Christ who yokes himself beside us, and whose Passion was one of suffering unto death on a cross. Yet this Passion has a mysterious ending, one not confined to capital punishment on a tree; no, it is an ending that inaugurates a great hope. For this passion ends in Resurrection and promises victory beyond death's horizon. When this Passion drives our weightlifting, it transforms all our every-day and most impossible struggles into meaningful labor for the Kingdom of God.

May that Passion allow us to lift the weights of God's Kingdom, and to find rest in the meaning and mission of God's call. Amen.